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OLD YORKTOWN AND ITS HISTORY

By Mrs. Sydney Smith

Smith, Margaret P. (Crosby)



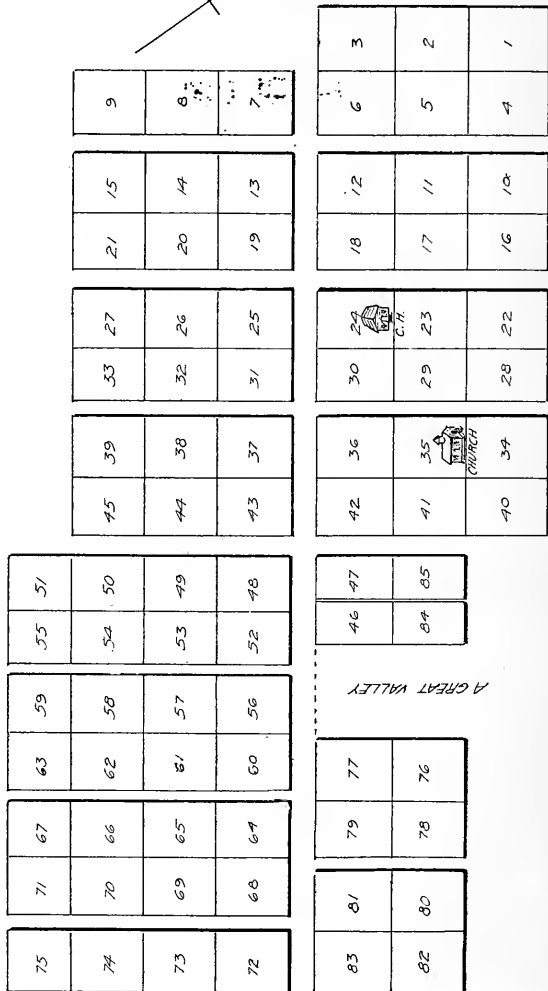
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Yorktown, Va.

DEEDS, ORDERS, WILLS, &c.
 No 9, PAGE 70
 1691 TO 1694

A PLOT OF THE TOWN BELONGING TO YORK COUNTY
 BY LAWRENCE SMITH, SURVEYOR



YORK RIVER, SEPTEMBER 24, 1691

PER J. SEDGWICK
 D. CLARK

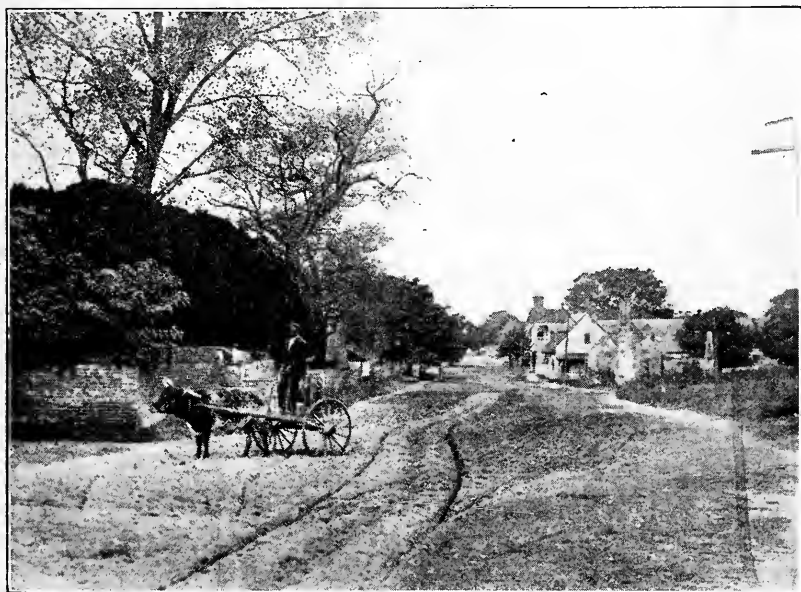
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Old Yorktown and Its History

BY MRS. SYDNEY SMITH.

THE TOWN OF YORK (now Yorktown) was laid off in 1691 by Laurence Smith, surveyor. The king issued orders that fifty acres of land should be bought and laid off for a shire town (court-house town), and must be paid for from the king's treasury (which was tobacco). The land belonged to Benjamin Read, of Gloucester, and the amount paid for it was ten thousand pounds of tobacco. The river on which Yorktown was built was first called the Charles River, and afterwards the York, from York in England, from which the town and river took their name. A map of the town made by Laurence Smith in 1691 is on record in the clerk's office and a facsimile will be found on the first page of this book. The street scene



MAIN STREET.

in the picture shows the original main street of the old town, the only street that runs parallel with the river. There are seven cross streets running east and west: Bacon, Smith, Pearl, Read, Grace, Ballard and Buckner, all of which were laid off and named at the time that the town was laid off. Yorktown has been



MAIN STREET—LOOKING EAST.



MAIN STREET—LOOKING WEST.

burned three times and very few of the old houses remain. All that is left of the Revolutionary breastworks are a few mounds which will be seen on the left-hand side of the road as one leaves the monument. All of the forts around Yorktown were products of the Revolution but were reinforced during the War Between the States by Magruder when McClellan came up the Peninsula. Being already there, it was easier to reinforce them than to build others. Fort Hamilton, just out of the town, was named for the gallant young general, Alexander Hamilton, who took this fort. It is in a good state of preservation and is seen on the left in going to Temple Farm, on which is the Moore House, where the Articles of Agreement were drawn up.

The old Episcopal Church, built in 1700, is constructed of oyster shells and a formation of rock and sand stuccoed. The original building was Cruciform, but the arms of the cross were destroyed, and only the main part of the building is left. The foundation of one of the arms is still to be seen on the left. The bell and communion service were presented to the church by Queen Anne, and both are still used. The bell bears the date 1725. It withstood everything except the Civil War, when a magazine exploded in the west end of the town while McClellan



EPISCOPAL CHURCH.
Built 1700.

was there, and damaged the belfry so badly the bell fell and was cracked. It was taken away by one of the soldiers to Philadelphia, where it fell into the hands of some smelting company. In 1881, the time of the Centennial at Yorktown, it was recast and sent back as a present to the church.

In the yard of the church are many old tombs, six generations of the Nelson family being represented among them. That of Scotch Tom Nelson, the founder of the Nelson family in York, is first and is an antique monument. On the four sides are cherubs. On the head of one a crown is being placed, and another with a trumpet is proclaiming "All Glory to God." The inscription has all disappeared. At the foot of this grave is another tomb made of brick and not so elaborate. It marks the body of President William Nelson, son of Scotch Tom Nelson and president of the King's Council. Then comes the grave of Governor Nelson, son of William Nelson. This grave lay for years unmarked, no one knowing exactly where this great man was buried. Mr. Lee, of Gloucester, rector of the church, found an old history in which it was stated that Governor Thomas Nelson was buried at the foot of the grave of his father, President William Nelson. Since then the descendants of the Nelsons have marked his grave with a large granite slab bearing the following inscription:

"GENERAL THOMAS NELSON, JR.,
PATRIOT, SOLDIER, CHRISTIAN GENTLEMAN,
BORN DECEMBER 12, 1738; DIED JANUARY 2, 1789.
MOVER OF THE RESOLUTION OF MAY 16, 1776, IN THE VIRGINIA
CONVENTION INSTRUCTING HER DELEGATES IN CONGRESS TO
MOVE THAT BODY TO DECLARE THE COLONIES FREE AND
INDEPENDENT STATES; SIGNER OF THE DECLARATION
OF INDEPENDENCE; WAR GOVERNOR OF VIRGINIA;
COMMANDER OF THE VIRGINIA FORCES.
'HE GAVE ALL FOR LIBERTY!'"

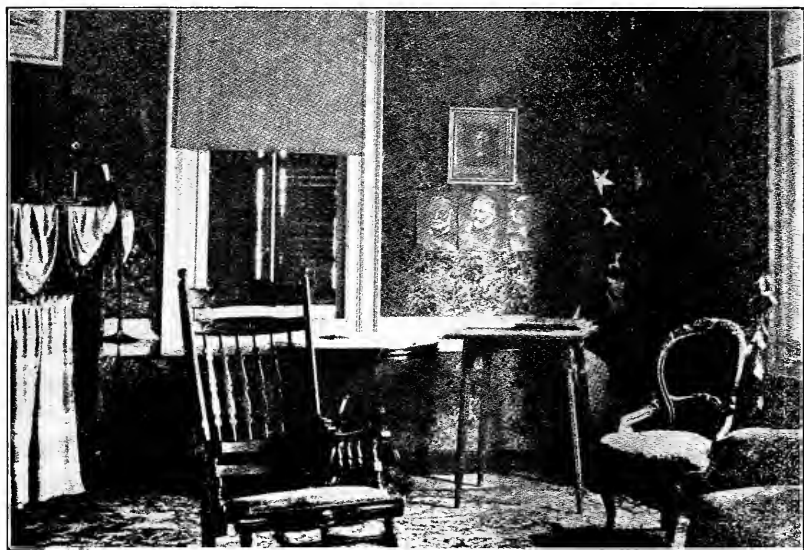
The other three generations are buried to the right of these tombs, and their graves are inclosed by an iron fence.

During the War of 1812, when the soldiers went through Yorktown burning everything as they went, they took the furniture out of the church and made a bonfire, afterwards using



"THE MOORE HOUSE."

Home of Governor Spottswood, and where Articles of Agreement were drawn up between the Americans and English in 1781.



ROOM IN MOORE HOUSE IN WHICH ARTICLES OF AGREEMENT WERE DRAWN UP

the church for a stable. It was also used during the Civil War as a hospital.

The Moore House, on Temple Farm, was the summer home of Governor Spottswood, who was the great Marlborough's side-de-camp, and who had borne the news of Bernheim to England. He established the iron foundry in America. His body was brought from Maryland and buried on the farm by what is called "The Temple." It is said that Governor Spottswood built a temple or church on the farm, and it is from this that the name is derived. This is traditional and not authentic, as it is thought that the temple is of older date. The name may have been taken from the ancestors of Governor Spottswood by that name. The Moore House is named for Bernard Moore, who married the daughter of Governor Spottswood. In this house, in the room on the right as you enter, the Articles of Agreement were drawn up. It has been said by some that they were signed in this room, but the fact is that Washington went out to his camp in the trenches to have them signed. At the Temple the only grave to be seen is that of Major William Gooch, with the following inscription:

"Within that tomb their dust interred lie,
No shape but substance, true nobility,
Itself, though young in years, just twenty-nine,
Yet graced with virtues moral and divine.
The church from him did good participate
In council rare fit to adorn a State."

There is another tomb that was ploughed up on the farm and is kept in the basement of the Moore House. This gives the name of Turner, and the date of his death as October 19, 1781, the day of the surrender. He was killed during the siege of Yorktown, and the inscription on the slab reads: "It was the cruel ball that took him from his loved ones' arms." There is a part of the foundation of the temple to be seen, and no doubt a good many tombs are buried beneath the ground and could be found by excavating. It seems, however, as if none of the owners of the farm care to have the place disturbed.

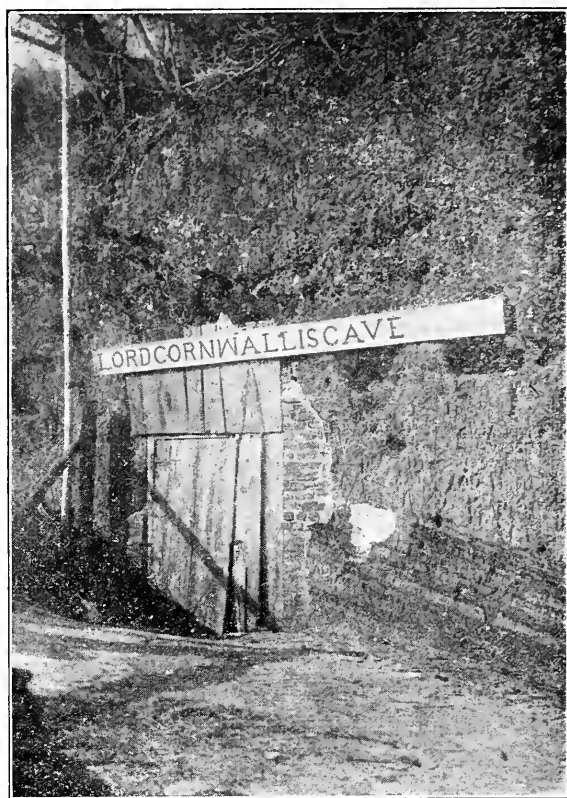
The old Custom House, which stands now in a good state of preservation, was the first custom house in America. Yorktown being the first port of entry, all vessels doing business with the Northern cities had to come first to this port for papers before going on. The building is said to have been erected about 1715, but this date is not authentic. It is built of old English brick.



FIRST CUSTOM HOUSE OF AMERICA.
Built About 1715.

The first and only bank in Yorktown is housed in the Custom House, and visitors are always welcome.

Cornwallis' cave, down under the hill, is said to have been the hiding place of Cornwallis during the siege of Yorktown. We cannot think this of the brave general at the head of the British Army. Perhaps if he went in the cave it was, just as the sight-seer goes, to look at it. It is thought to have been a smuggler's cave. The only way of getting into the cave was through a small hole just over where the door now is. By means of a ladder of some make anyone could crawl in and out without being seen. This cave was used during the Civil War as a magazine. A large fort was built around it to protect it. A passageway was constructed which led to the cave, and the holes which are cut in the cave were made to hold the large beam used in making the passageway. Some time after the war all of this gave way and fell in. The owner of the place cleared away the debris, dug out a place of entrance, put up a door, and at the time of the Centennial of 1881 began to charge an admission fee of ten cents. Whatever its history the cave is one of the places of interest of Yorktown and should be seen by all visitors. Upon entering



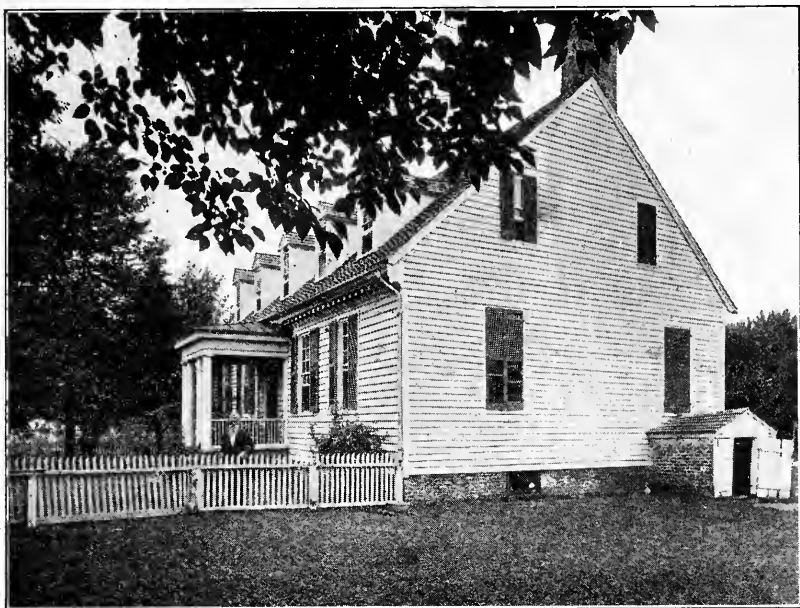
CORNWALLIS' CAVE

The Cave Where Cornwallis Was Supposed to Have Hidden During the Siege

one finds himself in a large room, to the right of which is a smaller room.

The West House was the home of Elizabeth Nelson, the oldest daughter of President William Nelson, who married Major West, a member of the governor's staff. Three Revolutionary cannon balls went through the house, a twelve-inch sill in the basement being cut in half by one of them, another going through the first floor. There are marks now on the walls in each room where the ball penetrated. This is now the home of the author of this pamphlet.

The small monument is said to mark the spot of the surrender. Mr. Shaw, a patriotic old gentleman, then superintendent of



THE WEST HOUSE.

Built by President William Nelson in 1720.

the National Cemetery, was very much interested in the historical places in Yorktown. After being in the town for some time without being shown anything to mark the spot of the surrender, he determined to try to find the place. It is known to have been somewhere near the cemetery, and at the place where the poplar trees were planted. In searching around he found what he thought to be the stumps of these trees. At this place he placed a monument at his own expense, hoping the government would in time replace it with a larger one. The government, doubting the accuracy of Mr. Shaw's location as being that where the sword was given up, and unwilling to erect a monument to mark such a great event, with the possibility of discovering in after years a mistake in the location, decided not to have anything to do with marking the spot of the surrender until it could be authentically ascertained. Mr. Shaw was very much disappointed and kept the little monument at his own expense while he lived. After his death no one seemed enough interested to look after it, and it is falling down by degrees. Soon there will be nothing left. It is hoped that in the near future the gov-

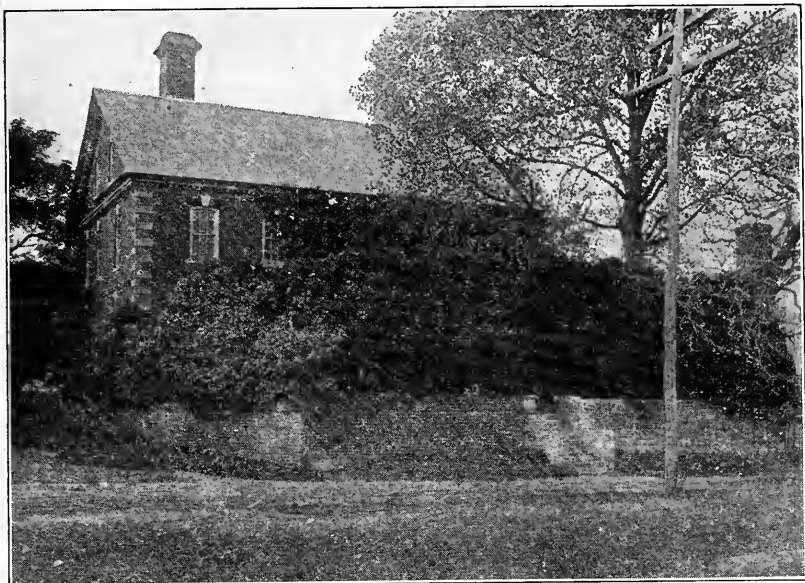


MONUMENT MARKING PLACE OF SURRENDER.

ernment will by some means find the spot of the surrender and erect a suitable monument, which could be looked after with little extra expense by the superintendent of the National Cemetery. This is the place of all places that the government of the United States should be interested in, for it was here that our country gained its independence. If not at the spot of the Shaw monument, then somewhere near it the sword of the British Army was given up and America was free.

The Old English Tavern, now called the Yorktown Hotel, was the first tavern to be built in Yorktown. It was here that Washington, LaFayette, Cornwallis and other great generals were entertained. It is thought by some to be the oldest house now standing in Yorktown.

The Nelson House was the home of the Governor Thomas Nelson, Jr., and the headquarters of Cornwallis during the latter part of the siege, his headquarters being first in Secretary House and what is known as Secretary Hill, just beyond the monument. Scotch Tom Nelson, the first Nelson ancestor in America, brought three sons with him, William, Hugh and Thomas. He built a home for each of them and this house was built for William Nel-



HOME OF GOVERNOR THOMAS NELSON
Built 1711.

son, president of the King's Council and father of Governor Thomas Nelson. Some give the date of its erection as 1740, but the writer found among some old papers copied from an old history giving 1711 as the time of the building of this house for William Nelson, the son of Scotch Tom Nelson. Miss Kate Nelson, the last of the Nelson family to live in this house, also told the writer that her father had stated to her that the house was built in 1711. It bears marks of Revolutionary cannon balls, one of which was fired by Governor Nelson himself when Cornwallis occupied the house. This house has a secret panel and a winding stairway leading to the attic. The wall around the house was not built until after the Civil War, and was put up by the last William Nelson, of Texas, a grandson of the governor. It was in the Nelson House that General LaFayette was entertained when he visited Yorktown in 1824. Scotch Tom Nelson's house stood on the opposite side of the street from the Nelson House and was shelled down during the siege. His office stood in good condition until two years ago, when it was burned. The Nelson heirs owned this place until 1907, when it was sold to Mr. Joseph Bryan, of Richmond. It is now owned by Captain George P.

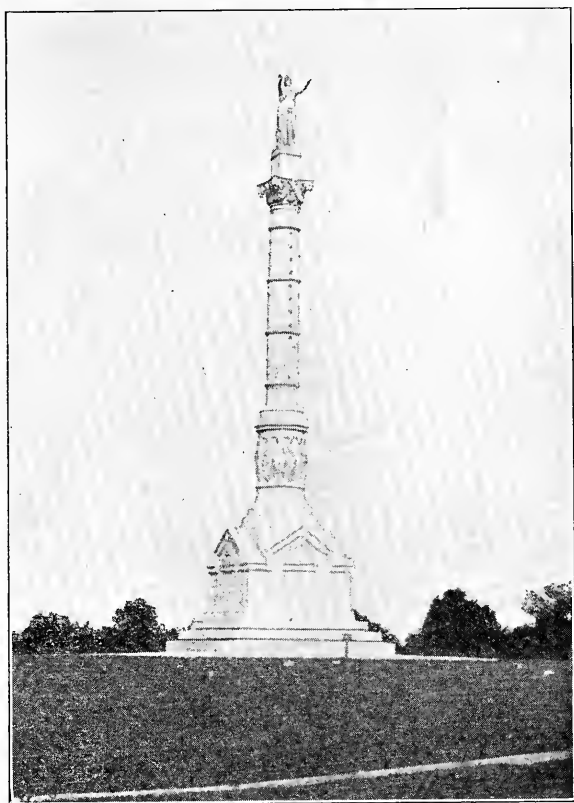


OLD ENGLISH TAVERN

Blow, of LaSalle, Ill. In the gable end of the house can be seen a hole made by the ball fired by Governor Thomas Nelson when it furnished refuge for the enemy. Governor Nelson was a signer of the Declaration of Independence, was governor, and commanded the Virginia militia during the Revolutionary War. When a boy of fourteen years he was sent to Eton and afterwards to Cambridge, where he graduated with high honors. In 1761 he returned home and was made a member of the House of Burgesses through the influence of his family.

The monument which stands to-day in Yorktown was built to commemorate the victory of the Revolution. In 1781 the first Congress which met after the Revolutionary War adopted resolutions ordering one hundred thousand dollars to be appropriated to build a monument in Yorktown to commemorate the victory of the Americans.

It was not until 1880 (nearly one hundred years afterwards) that the direction was carried out. There were three artists appointed, R. M. Hunt and J. A. Ward, of New York, and Henry Van Brunt, of Boston, and the design and model were to be accepted by the Secretary of War. The sentiment of this monument is intended to convey the idea set forth in the dedicatory



YORKTOWN MONUMENT.

Erected to Commemorate the Victory of the American Army in 1781.

inscription that by the victory of Yorktown the independence of America was achieved. The four sides of the base contain, first, an inscription dedicating the monument as a memorial of victory; second, an inscription presenting a succinct narrative of the siege; third, the treaty of alliance with the King of France; fourth, the treaty of peace with the King of England.

In the pediments over these four sides are carved, first, emblems of nationality; second, emblems of war; third, emblems of alliance; and, fourth, emblems of peace.

The base is devoted to the historical statements. On the circular produm are thirteen female figures, representing the thirteen original States. On the belt beneath their feet are the words, "One Country, One Destiny, and One Constitution."

The thirty-eight stars on the column represent the thirty-eight States that had been admitted to the Union up to the time that the monument was erected. In the midst of the stars is the shield of Yorktown, "The Branch of Peace." At the top stands the Goddess of Liberty, star-crowned, welcoming the people of all nations to share with us our peace and prosperity. The monument is ninety-five feet six inches in height. The inscriptions are as follows:

FIRST.

At Yorktown on October 19, 1781, after a siege of nineteen days by 5,500 Americans and 7,000 French troops of the line, 3,500 militia under the command of General Thomas Nelson and thirty-six French ships of war, Earl Cornwallis, commander of the British forces at Yorktown and Gloucester, surrendered his army of 7,251 officers and men, 840 seamen and 240 standards to his Excellency, George Washington, commander-in-chief of the combined forces of America and France, and to his Excellency, the Comte de Rochambeau, commanding the auxiliary troops of his Most Christian Majesty in America, and to his Excellency, the Comte de Grasse, commanding-in-chief the naval army of France in the Chesapeake.

SECOND.

The treaty of peace concluded February, 1778, between the United States of America and Louis XVI, King of France, declares the essential end of the present defensive alliance is to maintain effectually the liberty, sovereignty and independence, absolute and unlimited, of the United States as well in matters of government as of commerce.

THIRD.

Erected in pursuance of a resolution of Congress, adopted October 29, 1781, and one approved June 7, 1880, to commemorate the victory by which the independence of the United States of America was achieved.

FOURTH.

The provisional articles of peace concluded November 30, 1782, and the definitive treaty of peace concluded September 3, 1783, between the United States of America and George III, King of Great Britain and Ireland, declares his Britanic Majesty acknowledged the said United States, viz.: New Hampshire, Massachusetts Bay, Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, to be free, sovereign and independent States.

This monument was to have cost \$100,000. Only \$95,000 was paid, the remaining \$5,000 being put in the treasury, where it was drawing interest. Ex-President Taft visited the town while he was Secretary of State and became very much interested in Yorktown and the monument. Seeing only a little pale fence

around the monument, falling down from year to year, and learning of the \$5,000 lying in the treasury, he made up his mind to have this sum used in improving the premises and effected an appropriation of the money to that end. The grounds were put in order, granolithic walks laid, and an iron fence erected around the square.

Still another monument has adorned Yorktown. A monument was erected in the town in 1860 to commemorate the surrender. It was thirteen feet in height and composed of two bases of James River granite and a shaft of white marble bearing the following inscription:

"Erected the 19th day of October, 1860, by the regimental and company officers of the Twenty-first Regiment of Virginia militia of Gloucester county, and of the volunteer company attached hereto, to mark the spot of the surrender of Cornwallis' sword on the 19th of October, 1781."

This monument was furnished by John W. Davies, of Richmond. It was not erected on the 19th of October on account of a heavy storm, its erection being deferred until the 29th of October. The site was authenticated by several marks of identification which had been placed by William Nelson, son of Governor Nelson, and consisting of a heap of ballast stones differing from those common to the locality and supposed to have been brought over from England in vessels and to have dated back to the time when LaFayette visited the town in 1824. Another landmark was the poplar trees planted by William Nelson in the form of a square about the year 1847. The life of this monument was short. It fell a victim to the soldiers who were stationed nearby, and not a vestige of it remains. It is thought to have been carried off by relic hunters.

The monument which stands to-day at Yorktown as a memorial of victory was to have been placed on the spot of surrender, but the contract provided that it should be put in the town of York, and as the spot of surrender was outside of the town, a situation was chosen on the most beautiful bluff which overlooks the York River and on property owned by the government at the time of the erection of the monument.

A brief account of the siege of Yorktown follows: Cornwallis occupied the town with several of his ships lying at anchor above Gloucester Point. The American Army formed a crescent about Yorktown, Washington with his army being stationed about three miles out in the county to the south, Nelson with the militia



THE HARBOR, YORKTOWN, VA.

at Wormley's Creek, to the east, and Rochambeau to the west. The French fleet, Compte de Grasse commander, lay off in the river forming a block against the British. Cornwallis, finding himself completely hemmed in, attempted to get over to the Gloucester side, where part of his army was stationed. He had little batteaux (flat-bottomed boats) made ready so that when everything seemed opportune he might make his escape. At twelve o'clock the little boats with muffled oars, led by Cornwallis in person, started across the river. When they were in mid-stream a heavy storm arose, so violent that the small craft could not live in the rough waters. Some were driven ashore, some capsized, and others were captured by the French ships. Part of the English fleet were sunk and others captured by the French. Before the ships were taken Cornwallis directed that everything of any value be thrown overboard, and it is said that a large and heavy chest filled with money and other valuables was let down into the water in order that it might not fall into the hands of the Americans. Several times the river has been dragged for this chest, but nothing of the supposed Cornwallis treasure has ever been discovered. This occurred on October 18, 1781, and on the 19th at 11 o'clock the surrender took place. Cornwallis wrote to Washington requesting a postponement of the surrender by reason of his inability to attend on account of sickness. He had written to New York for reinforcements and

was expecting them at any time, and this was his actual motive for asking the postponement. Washington heard of this and even at the time that the message was sent ships were entering the river with reinforcements for the British Army. One was sunk at the mouth of the river by the French, and others were driven back. Washington refused Cornwallis' request and insisted that the surrender must take place on the 19th. Cornwallis sent General O'Hara to present the sword. Washington refused to receive the sword from a minor general and deputed General Lincoln to receive it for him from General O'Hara. This was a happy day for sweet revenge for General Lincoln, for the previous year he had surrendered at Charleston to an inferior officer.

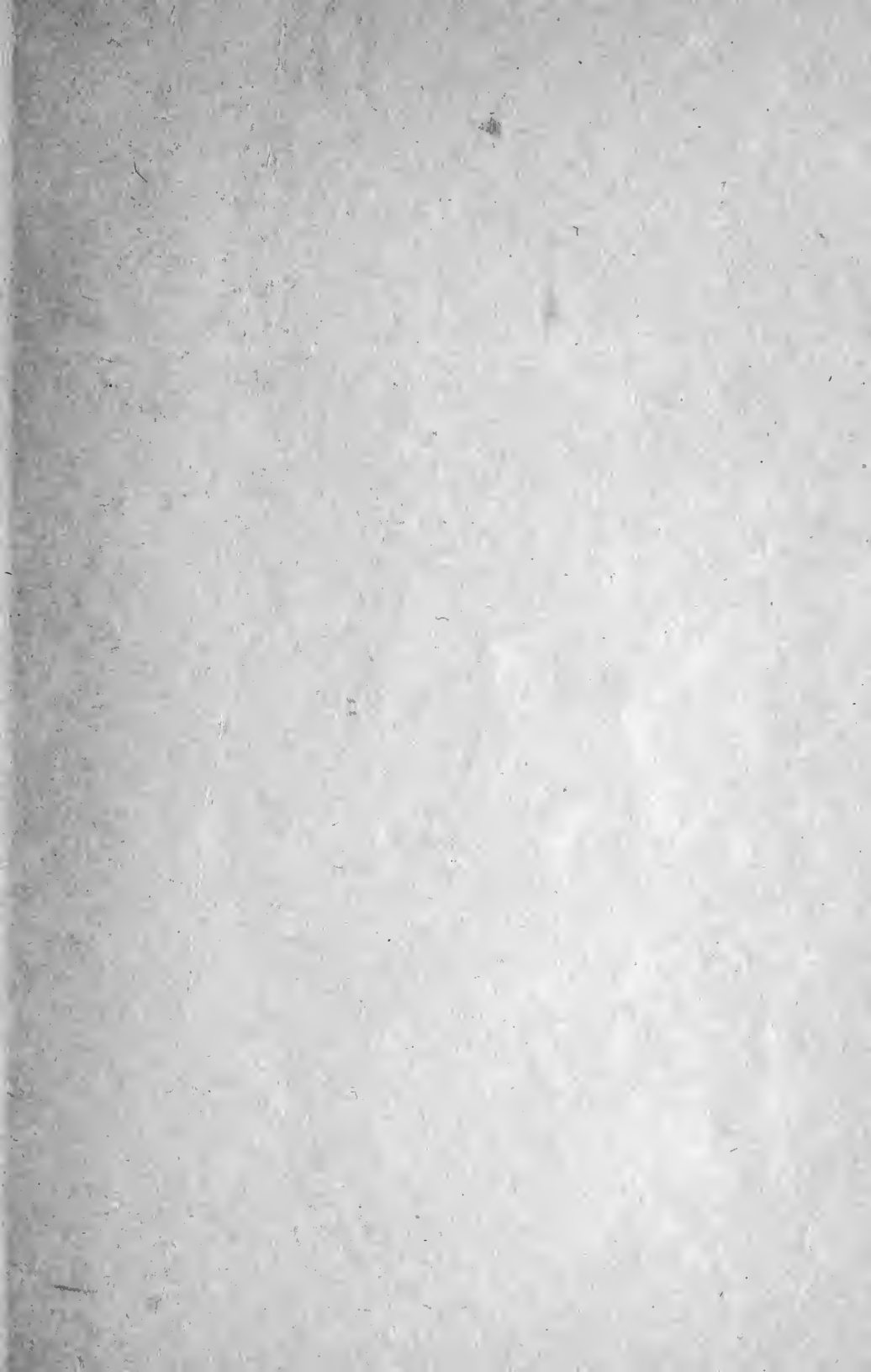
When the British Prime Minister heard the news of the surrender which ended the great Revolutionary War, he threw up his hands and exclaimed, "My God, it's all over." It was all over and "America was free."

When Cornwallis first entered Yorktown he made his headquarters at Secretary Nelson's house, which stood on Secretary Hill. This secretary of the King's Council was called Tory Nelson, because of his friendliness to the English, and it was because of his sympathy with the enemy that Cornwallis selected this place for his headquarters. The French found that Cornwallis was hiding there and opened fire on the house. The occupants were dining. The butler was killed while serving the general. When Cornwallis found the house was being shelled he said, "It's time to be moving," and went immediately to Governor Nelson's home. Secretary Nelson's house was totally destroyed. Learning that the British commander had moved to the governor's house, the French troops began firing on him there. Washington, hearing that Nelson's property was being destroyed, sent word that nothing belonging to him must be damaged. Nelson himself, who was commanding the Virginia militia, when he heard Washington's orders, went out to the ships and said, "I want no property of mine saved that holds refuge for the enemy." Whereupon he aimed the gun and offered five guineas to the man who would fire it. The gunners refused to disobey Washington's command. General Nelson fired the gun himself and the ball struck the gable end of the house, making the hole which can now be seen by the tourist.

Nelson spent his entire fortune in the Revolution for his country's cause and died in poverty, the grave being unmarked until 1907. No recompense was ever made to the family by the

nation. Some years after the war the losses were computed for the purpose of applying to Congress for an appropriation to cover them. A bill was brought up in the meantime for Mrs. Hamilton, the wife of Alexander Hamilton (who it was that made the great speech under the walls of the redoubt at Yorktown and was the general who took Fort Hamilton, named after him). A member of Congress inquired if there was not a poor house in New York, that Mrs. Hamilton had come to Congress begging. Governor Nelson, being a listener in the legislative halls at the time of this incident, refused to proceed further in his mother's behalf, saying that he was unwilling to permit her name to be brought before a body that tolerated such expressions. Mrs. Nelson, wife of the governor, died at her home in Hanover and was buried in an unmarked grave in the old family graveyard. After the grave of Governor Nelson was found the Nelson descendants wished to have the remains of Mrs. Nelson brought and laid beside her husband, but as there is nothing to show where her grave is it will be difficult to carry this out after so many years.

At the time of the Revolutionary War Yorktown boasted 3,600 inhabitants. Now there are scarcely 300, of which only about 125 are white.



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